

Karen Donders, *Public Service Media and Policy in Europe*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 234 pages. ISBN: 9780230290969. GBP 50.

The debate on the justification of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB), whether it should be abolished as a media institution or how it should be reformed, is by no means new. In fact, it goes back to the early days of public media and has been aptly reflected in the work of Coase, who in a series of articles examined and often harshly criticized the monopoly in the British broadcasting system – historically the very first PSB system, established in 1925 for radio broadcast and subsequently, in 1936, for television too. In that particular period at the dawn of broadcasting, the reality was one of spectrum scarcity, high thresholds of participation and maintenance of service, as well as in policy terms – of heavy regulation orthodoxly applied to all public utility sectors. Even for this period, examining the pioneering instance of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Coase famously argued that the assertion that monopoly is technically necessary due to spectrum limitations is incorrect, that both the financial and the efficiency claims, conventionally put forward to justify PSB monopoly, are inconclusive. Moreover, Coase noted that the major argument that a monopoly is necessary to maintain a balanced programme of high cultural quality is akin to arguments of a totalitarian philosophy, and it is only regrettable that the case for competition had never been given a proper hearing. Coase's critique, powerful as it is, was a solitary voice against the mainstream understanding of the day in support of a monopolistic, State-supported BBC, as articulated by the 1962 Pilkington Report.

Much has happened in the past fifty years, and the broadcasting system, and in fact the entire media landscape, has changed in many significant ways. Yet the debate on the role of public media and the involvement of the State in them perseveres. Indeed, it has been reinvigorated following the tectonic shifts in media production, distribution, access and consumption caused by digital technologies in general, and the Internet in particular. Curiously, however, the gist of the debates has remained almost the same and is still focused on a set of economic arguments that call for State intervention in public media, and not unimportantly, on the various political interpretations of these economic arguments. In Europe, the debate has another essential core too, as PSB has traditionally been entrusted to serve some higher goals intrinsically related to key democratic and cultural processes. Conventionally the goal-definition here is structured around one central concept, that is the Habermasian public sphere, and PSB is conceptualized as nothing less than its institutional guarantor. Accordingly, PSB in Western Europe has developed as the core media institution at the national level and has become deeply embedded in many facets of the nation's economic, political, social and cultural life.

Against the backdrop of PSB's history (including the inherent strong path dependencies), its vital tasks in society, as well as the dramatic changes brought about by the digitally networked environment, the question of the future of PSB is very interesting, to say the least, and highly challenging at the same time. It has naturally sparked intense discussions, both in the academic and in the policy domains. Despite the different and often diverging viewpoints, all seem to agree that PSB must reform, albeit the ultimate destination and the ways of getting there are vexed questions. To offer a snapshot of its current state, the discourse on PSB's reform can be mapped onto three policy scenarios: (i) the pure PSB, which focuses only on persisting market failures, as very narrowly construed and to some extent comes to resemble the US model of marginalized public broadcasters; (ii) the reformed PSB, which addresses market failures but construes them somewhat broadly, admitting that the new digital space brings with it new pitfalls and thus reasons for intervention in order to provide the socially desirable level of public service in the media; and (iii) the reinvented PSB, which seeks to proactively serve the public in the digital networked environment by embracing technological change, assuming newer tasks and positioning itself across multiple platforms.

The book by Donders makes an essential contribution to these complex debates, and more importantly, adds some new value to an otherwise saturated discourse. It conceptualizes the transition from PSB to Public Service Media (PSM) – that is the third of the above scenarios – in a pragmatic manner, while putting forward some key principles, which may guide the

transitional process. In this manner, Donders embraces the digital change, while at the same time distancing herself from the often exalted voices calling for a bigger, better and better financed PSB institution that appear to share an extreme optimism about the power of new technologies, oddly coupled with a general misgiving as to the power of market.

Donders' work presents a much more nuanced strand in the academic discourse, which argues for an evidence-based perspective in the transition of PSB into PSM. As Donders puts it, PSB should be "big if necessary and as good as required". Accordingly, she develops an analytical framework to match this quality and designs a sustainable, future-oriented policy approach for PSM. Donders defines six conditions as essential: (i) cross-media, meaning that PSB should be active on all platforms; (ii) core, meaning that the services PSB offer should relate to core objectives set by the government; (iii) cost, relating to adequate funding; (iv) clarity, relating to transparency; (v) control and command, relating to the internal and external accountability of the public broadcaster; and (vi) checks and balances, relating to installing an appropriate control system.

Donders does not however just dream about this forward-looking design; she puts the analytical framework to work to address one specific research question, and that is – how the policy of the European Union, in particular its State aid policy, has impacted on the evolution towards sustainable PSM policies in Western European Member States. Donders finds such an exercise necessary after almost twenty years of the Commission's intervention with PSB and in light of the 2009 update of the Commission's guidelines applied to assess the funding of public broadcasters, also with regard to launching new media services.

It is the book's hypothesis – and one that the author sets out to prove in a systematic and well-structured manner – that, contrary to mainstream academic and political discourse that the European Commission marginalizes public broadcasters, it has in fact fostered the ongoing transition from PSB to PSM. In so doing, the Commission has also triggered valuable reflections on what public service mission suits the digital era and has rendered the stakeholders involved more accountable and responsive to the functioning of public service broadcasters. Considering the complex dynamics of the relationship between the EU and the Member State levels, as well as the convoluted separation of competences along the thin line between culture and commerce, it cannot be expected that the European Commission has plainly, in its own right, set the policy parameters and objectives. Rather, as Donders argues, it has been through the multi-stakeholder negotiation processes at the European level and their implementation at the national and regional levels that the Commission has managed to effectively calibrate PSB policies in order to facilitate and support PSB's reform in the digital era.

To prove this hypothesis, while giving the background of EU audiovisual media policy and State aid control as a branch of EU competition policy, Donders focuses on analysing the practice of EU State aid control as applied to PSB. She follows it chronologically from the very outset in the early days of commercial broadcasting, when the Commission was more or less taken by surprise and had not developed a coherent or in fact any approach towards disciplining PSB, while allowing sufficient leeway for an institution that is inherently performing cultural and other societal functions, which are in the competence of the Member States. Donders argues that despite this unfortunate start, the Commission's decision practice does not reveal a negative preconception of PSB; nor does it obstruct its "digitization". In fact, Donders conjectures that the European Commission has learnt from the experience and moved in the right direction. The Commission's stance appears to have evolved from politically driven to more legalistic, which is beneficial for legal certainty. The Commission's intervention has also resulted in some harmonization of the Member States' PSB policies, as a set of common principles, such as transparency, clear definition of the public service remit and an *ex ante* test for new media services, appear to be widely agreed and acted upon. Donders acknowledges that the Commission's involvement is now beyond doubt and has decidedly led to the adoption of a more economic approach towards PSB, also at the national level. Last but certainly not least, and despite the stronger economic stance of the Commission, Donders underlines that the Commission has come to accept PSB as a holistic project. This has not always been the case and a few State aid decisions may easily contribute to proving the contrary. Yet, Donders is confident

that not only has the Commission rightly accepted the holistic nature of the PSB project but has also gradually developed the ability to strike a balance between the need for coherence and a case-specific approach. Importantly, in relation to the initially sketched analytical framework, Donders also believes that the Commission has forced the Member States and other stakeholders to reflect on the transition from PSB to PSM. Donders' conjectures are supported not only by the survey of the Commission's State aid practice but also by three country case studies. As the PSB institution is not uniform but is in fact strikingly different in each Member State and driven by its own set of political, economic, social and cultural factors, such an approach is fully justified. The case studies link well to the book's previous analyses and contribute to seeing and understanding the entire landscape of EU public media policies, straining to accommodate both commerce and culture, the national and the European, the analogue and the digital.

Donders' work will be important as it allows a pragmatic, future-oriented approach towards public service media mediating many of the intrinsic heated controversies. The analysis is pleasantly stripped of the often biased and even emotionally charged voices, and could trigger a more productive debate amongst scholars and policy-makers. Yet, sometimes and somewhat disappointingly for the more advanced readers, the analysis offers only a bird's eye view – details and more concrete elaborations are missing and not all of the (good) ideas are substantiated. Admittedly, providing these details would have required a trade-off to the detriment of the succinct, well-structured enquiry, which succeeds in covering a truly vast and complex landscape. Looking into the future, it remains to be seen whether the Commission will live up to Donders' fairly positive expectations and how the entire project of public service media will evolve in the face of the still unfolding transformations of the digital environment.

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